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AUTHOR Ames, Harold; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The Takoma Park (Maryland) Adult Education Refugee Center offers intensive programs for adults granted refugee or asylum status. Recently, adult Asian children of Americans stationed in Vietnam have entered the center's programs. Program goals include the development of students' cultural communication and English language skills needed for competing in the job market. Language skills are taught in conjunction with specific job types. Anecdotal observations of Amerasians in the programs include these: young women have generally had more schooling than men, are better equipped to deal with the American educational setting, have worked hard, have good relationships with their mothers, and have learned to combine Vietnamese politeness with American flexibility. Mothers entering the program with or after their children had varied success with language learning, with most difficulty in reading and writing. The most obvious needs of the students include English language skills, American work habits, and employment skills. However, progress in those skills depends on attention to personal and developmental needs, because this population may be undergoing adolescent personality integration, changing family roles, and culture shock simultaneously. Several strategies have been found effective in response to students' needs in the areas of role models, personal associations, cultural identification, self-confidence, and language. (MSE)

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Amerasians and ESOL: Responding to Their Needs 10/28/89

Harold Ames, Frank Farley, Sharon Mandel, Anne Sullivan

The purpose of this presentation is to share with our colleagues our educational experiences with Amerasians at Takoma Park Adult Education Refugee Center. These experiences have been educational for us, for we have learned to understand their needs, adapt teaching strategies, and appreciate their strengths. The Amerasians have learned to work successfully with many different co-workers in the American way, speak English, and know that they are not alone in their efforts to obtain a better life in the United States.

This paper will introduce the reader to the Amerasians with a brief historical perspective, a description of Takoma Center, and anecdotal descriptions of some students. From the student vignettes the reader will be able to distinguish personalities as well as patterns of needs and teaching strategies which will be delineated later. Finally, a conclusion will express hopes for future support services for Amerasians.

Historical background--

From 1964 until the Fall of Saigon in 1975, millions of Americans served in Vietnam. Manpower heights were reached in 1967 and 1968 with half a million Americans stationed in South Vietnam. Approximately 10,000 children were fathered by Americans during the war.

The first large group of Amerasians arrived in the United States during the 1983-1985 period. Following negotiations with the Vietnamese government, Congress enacted the Amerasian Homecoming Act in March of 1988. About 10,000 (Amerasians and accompanying family members) were to be admitted in the 1989 federal fiscal year, and the number is expected to be higher in the 1989 federal fiscal year. About one quarter of the Amerasians were ages 14-16, while the remaining were ages 17-25. Males outnumbered females 53% to 47%. As of February 1989, about 75% of those leaving Vietnam were of urban background. It is expected that the percentage of rural Vietnamese leaving will increase as a result of the Vietnamese government's recent efforts to register those in the countryside.

The Philippine Refugee Processing Center found 11% illiterate in their native language and 82% literate in their own language but with no English. The Washington DC area ranks first among cluster-site resettlements in the United States with over 500 Amerasians. At present Amerasians and their mothers make up nearly 20 percent of our enrollment at Takoma Center.

Takoma Center--

Takoma Center offers intensive programs for Montgomery County adults who have been granted refuge/asylum status. The goal of the programs is to develop cultural communication behaviors and English language skills in order to compete in the American job market. We use a functional approach to teach more than 420 students a year. Language skills are taught in conjunction with such jobs as gardening, cleaning, sewing, operating a snack bar, volunteering in the community, utilizing community resources, operating a mini-mall, and assembling electronic components on printed circuit boards. Students may participate in the Vocational Communications program for six months and in the Vocational English with Skills program for three months. There is a beginning class for those who are illiterate, or have so little English that it is not possible for them to start at the first level.

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Some anecdotal observations--

Young women--

Because young women have generally had more schooling, perhaps seven years (this shows variation in accordance with class and other factors of status in their background), they are better equipped to deal with American educational settings. In addition, many have had to work very hard to support their families and have the "American" work ethic. They usually have had better relationships with their mothers. Americans will often find them attractive in appearance and personality. They have retained the politeness of the Vietnamese culture with some flexibility learned from the American culture.

Lai at first didn't want to come to my class when she was promoted because she had become attached to the previous teacher as a friend and father figure; however, later we also became very close. She was a take charge kind of person, capable of seeing any need in the work situation and cheerfully meeting it. She was the Miss Congeniality of the class, and she was positively aggressive in her desire to learn English, although she found the writing difficult. One day to my surprise she organized a tremendous lunch for the entire class and carried it on her two-hour bus ride. That day her charming, ten-year-old daughter entertained us by singing traditional Vietnamese songs. Her Vietnamese husband has arrived from the camp in the Philippines, and she is expecting another child.

Ly is young, sociable, and bouncy. She has a lot going for her and is well liked by both Americans and Vietnamese. She is progressing nicely in work habits and English. She completed a beautiful bookbag without previous sewing experience, and it was a pleasure to see her pride in accomplishing this task. Her father has supported her, for one day she came to class to show pictures of him after he came from New Jersey to visit her and her Vietnamese family. This was openly shared with all, and the other mothers of Amerasians were envious.

Yen has had a much harder time. Within two weeks after her arrival her sponsor found a night job for her. She arrived at school very tired and found concentrating difficult. She was retiring and shy and was hesitant about participating in activities. In the interview part of the end-of-session test, she showed signs of intense nervousness. She continues at the Center and is making progress in all of her problem areas.

Thuy, about nineteen, had a younger Amerasian sister in high school. Her mother was also in the class. The mother had developed a kind of "rough and ready" English communication through her association with Americans and played an aggressive role in the class, while Thuy was reticent about speaking or writing (though obviously understanding very quickly). At that time students were given ten minutes on some days to write a few words in a journal as a letter to the teacher. Then I would write a short reply, not as correction, but to show understanding. Thuy turned in her journal without writing anything, so I had the Vietnamese secretary of our program write a a note in the journal in Vietnamese telling her that I understood that she didn't like to make mistakes, but all I was interested in was that she write something in English because if she didn't start, she never would. From then on she made the effort to write something each time.

Kim Anh regretted that she was just a few months old to be admitted to high school when she arrived. She had six years of school in Vietnam and had the dream of continuing. She entered at the first level and progressed steadily through the program, including the electronics preparation class. She tried a GED class but found it too difficult, and is now working full time and taking ESOL at Montgomery College.

Young men--

Thanh had troubles from the beginning. He seemed to be withdrawn and worried. He spent his breaks alone for the most part, and his attendance was poor. His learning seemed limited due to anxiety, but the few days he wasn't worried there was a sparkle in his eyes and an eagerness to respond. He did eventually get help from a Vietnamese mental health counselor. He began to share the sources of his anxiety with me and to join the other young men at the break. His main worry was that he would not be able to provide for his mother and sister, who both showed little promise of learning English or becoming independent. When he was promoted to the next class, there were several substitutes (perhaps this disoriented him some), his severe headaches reappeared, and he dropped out. He is reported to be working in construction now.

Ca was nineteen and here without family. A Vietnamese social worker told us beforehand that his behavior was very juvenile. The class had been organized for two or three days when he started. During the course of the class I put the students together as partners. Ca refused to sit beside the older Vietnamese woman I had designated as his partner, so I picked up the empty desk between them and tossed it into the back row of desks. He moved his desk over and followed directions. I didn't know if he would be back the next day, but he was, and in spite of demonstrating a very short attention span, getting out of his seat and wandering around the room, interrupting while others were talking, and not paying attention at times, he continued making progress, albeit slow, in the program. He is now working in a job corps type of situation in Pennsylvania where there is adequate direction and supervision.

Toni was nineteen and had not attended school, so he was essentially illiterate when he entered. He began to understand and speak fairly well, and was making progress in reading and writing when his parents and the social service counselor decided to enroll him in a job corps-like program sponsored by the county in which he gets paid for on-the-job training and has English classes once a week.

Johnny was twenty-five and had attended eight years of school. His mother was a teacher in Vietnam, and he showed a higher level of education than many of the refugees. He entered at the second level and did well before he decided to drop out and enroll in a GED class. Unfortunately, we don't know whether he continued or not.

Mothers of Amerasians--

Three of the mothers were older persons (the children, now in their twenties, were born when their mothers were in their late thirties) and seemed quite dependent on the Amerasian children to provide for them. They had only one year of school in Vietnam. Two of them showed no progress in producing English after nine months in the program. They were physically attractive and eager to please. They increased their listening abilities and learned to sew well, but they seemed totally incapacitated by the demand to produce language (one of them, however, had suffered a head injury). The third older woman learned oral language quite well, but she refused to advance to a higher level because she was overwhelmed by reading and writing. Due to health problems, their age, and an inclination to dependence, these older women will probably not go on to take jobs, but remain dependent on their children.

A number of other mothers of Amerasians have entered the Center recently. Two were assigned to level two because of the quality of their intake interviews, but they had to be moved to the beginning class because they could not do the minimum

of reading that was necessary. They are eager to learn, but find learning to read and write difficult. Several others, with less English but more education, moved quickly to the next level and are progressing well. Another, who spoke well but could not read, was making good progress in reading in the beginning class when her sponsor found a job for her and she had to leave the Center. We hope that the start she got here will enable her to continue her reading.

The needs--

The most obvious needs of Amerasians include the English language, American work habits, and employment skills. However, little progress will be made in addressing these priorities unless personal developmental needs are simultaneously being addressed at school and elsewhere. These developmental needs of Amerasian youth include needs for appropriate role models, peer associations, cultural identification, and personal goals and self-confidence. These youths may be undergoing a three-level identity crisis: adolescent personality integration, changing family roles, and cultural identification.

Like other refugees, Amerasians also go through the stress of culture shock and adjusting unrealistic expectations. Of course, we must remember that each individual is a unique personality -- the result of individual experiences and family relationships as well as common cultural and historical events. In fact, at Takoma Center we have Amerasian students from 19 to 30 years old and their mothers as old as 62. So the first rule in assessing needs is: don't make rules. However, we have found many Amerasians to be adaptable, eager for friendships and determined to make a new life. A chart follows that delineates specific teaching strategies that have been helpful.

RESPONDING TO NEEDS

NEED	RESPONSE STRATEGY
ROLE MODEL	be one provide male associations (for the men) use partner activities, student "sponsors"
ASSOCIATIONS	sincerely accept and care about them mixed class helpful new attitude of Vietnamese refugees support their community parties
CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION	expose to positive aspects of American culture (friendliness, efficiency, authority) values and behaviors important at work appropriate social questions

SELF-CONFIDENCE	structure lessons for success training that enables them to hold a job teach survival skills network for referral services help them form realistic goals
LANGUAGE	on the one hand, learning needs to be well-structured and organized for efficiency, but on the other, students with little prior education often cannot comprehend or tolerate long periods of academic intensity base instruction on "learning by doing" be less structured techniques for maintaining classroom control if there is a group of nonacademic youth include: eye control, affection, humor, telling men that they are men now (not boys), partner activities, music, and learning activities that require a physical response, even benign inattention on occasion

Conclusion--

We don't pretend to be the experts and are eager to interface with other support service agencies. From our observations and experiences with a number of Amerasians and their families we have reached the following conclusions: This population is too diverse to set up specific educational programs for "Amerasians." Resources would be best spent on programs (such as ours) which aid cultural adjustment, teach English and vocational communication (how to do a job American style, how to get one, and how to keep one). If the goal is to integrate Amerasians in the American work force, what is the point of isolating them in separate programs, even from other refugees and ESOL students?

The associations the Amerasians form at the Center not only foster self-confidence and realistic strategies for communicating on the job but also help them prepare for answering the personal questions. What are some appropriate short range goals? What might be a long range goal? The vocational communication training enables students to survive by holding an entry-level job and simultaneously developing skills for the next level.

After refugee assistance what? The answer is an individual one and should be determined, case by case, with a counselor's informed advice and the client's determination. For some, the job corps situation is the best alternative; for some, going to work and attending community class is an option; and for a few, working and attending a community college is a good decision. Are there programs where a business will undertake to sponsor an Amerasian's work training?

The uneducated mothers face the same problems as illiterate Americans with no resources. However, they do have nonverbal skills and could do some job. Any English they retain is likely to be oral English from a work situation. Any writing will be extremely difficult. Perhaps, the best effort would be an outreach program that offers one-on-one tutoring. The qualifications of the tutors would be training and patience.